The Monster in the Well

By Henry H. Neff

I must put pen to paper, commit these events to the page before they are lost with so many other things. My life, as I have ever understood it, is finished. I have no family, no loved ones, no trace of dignity. All I can do is serve as a scribe, a witness to the terrible things that have swallowed my existence and, as it would seem, the very world.

My name is Robert Hague, born in Cape Town, most recently of London where I lived with my wife and daughter. I was educated at Eton and Cambridge, after which I studied to become an architect, joining the estimable firm of Langston, Finch, and York, where I enjoyed a promising career.

The troubles began one evening in August when I popped into The Uxbridge Arms for a drink after a long week at the office. The pub was doing a sleepy trade –locals enjoying a pint and some quiet talk while the football match played out on the television. It was not my usual practice to drink at the end of the day. I was a family man, but work had been wearing on me...I was on the cusp of a partnership when the firm's founders informed me that the partnership would be awarded to myself or Philip Vardon – a talented, visionary young colleague some three years my junior. This was an unexpected blow. I had mentored Phil, nurtured him along, and felt a sting of ingratitude to learn that he was bucking the normal progressions to jostle for a perch that I considered mine.

While I brooded on these affairs, I noticed that the seat next to me had been taken and that the occupant was staring at me.

"Great shoes," he said, "Where'd you get 'em?"

"Pardon?" I asked, a bit put off by his familiarity and presumption. He must have been an American.

"The shoes," he continued, unabashed. "Who makes 'em?"

"John Lobb," I replied stiffly.

"Hmmm," the stranger mused. "And that shirt?"

"Thomas Pink," I snapped. "And with your permission, the rest will remain anonymous."

“Ah,” he said, with a wolfish grin. “Don’t take offense, friend. I can simply tell that you’re a man who likes nice things. I respect a man who likes nice things. You must be...an attorney...no, no...an architect!”

Now this caught my attention. I was dressed professionally in suit and tie, but carried no token to mark my trade. How did this stranger know that I was an architect? My curiosity got the better of me.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“A lucky guess,” he said. “You have the hands and affect of an artist. You wear your hair longer than your typical attorney or doctor, but you dress conservatively. It suggests that you’re at heart a creative who swung toward the structured end of the spectrum.”

Dear lord, the man spoke the truth! I was fascinated.

“Robert Hague,” I said, extending my hand.

The stranger smiled and shook it gladly, but never gave his name. I found that odd, but not half so peculiar as his appearance. He was an imposing man, tan, rawboned and barrel-chested. He leaned upon a brass-topped cane, grinned at me from behind a rich black beard. His suit was finely made, but of a bygone style, as was the hat that sat low upon his broad forehead. I might have mistaken him for a bellhop or attendant at one of the nearby hotels, but for his exceedingly his rich rings and heavy bracelets.

“Can I tempt you with another drink, Mr. Hague?” he asked, nodding toward my empty glass.

I consented, eager to converse with this stranger whose obvious eccentricities might put my own troubles into a more agreeable perspective. As soon as our drinks were poured, however, an argument broke out at one of the nearby tables. The bartender hurried over to break things up.

“Shame,” said the stranger, eyeing the quarrel. “People should get along.”

“Are you an American?” I asked. “I can’t place your accent.”

He smiled.

“Spent some time there,” he allowed. “But I’m from all over.”

“Ah,” I said, rattling the cubes. “A citizen of the world.”

“More like a tourist.”

Had I known then the perils that would soon befall the world, I would have understood this chuckling admission and fled.

But I did not. Instead, I laughed like a fool while he plied me with questions about my profession. At length, his queries focused on history and what I considered to be the greatest achievements in my field. While I pondered this, another quarrel broke out in the corner, this one resulting in honest-to-goodness fisticuffs between two seeming gentlemen. It was the strangest sight, these elderly specimens cursing and swinging at one another like a pair of street toughs. The stranger never even turned to witness the spectacle; he simply waited for my response.

“W-well, that’s hard to say,” I stammered, “There are so many traditions – eastern, western, ancient and modern. It’s really so subjective–”

“No need to quibble,” he interrupted. “What are your three favorites?”

“Well,” I said, trying not to stare as one of the bleeding combatants was escorted out, “I suppose my three favorites stem from my days as a student. If I had to choose, I suppose I’d select the Coliseum, Notre Dame, and the Pyramids.”

“Old buildings,” he observed with an approving nod. “None of your shiny skyscrapers eh?”

“You asked for favorites,” I shrugged. “I’m a romantic.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Do you think you could combine them?”

“What do you mean?” I said, finishing my drink and glancing at my watch.

“Combine them,” he repeated, motioning the bartender to refill my glass. “Into one building – one gorgeous, colossal tribute to human endeavor.”

“Well, certainly,” I said, “But it would be exceedingly difficult to do well. You can’t simply stack them or fit them together like a child’s blocks. Care would be needed to ensure the essentials of each were preserved while serving the whole....”

“I like the way you think,” laughed the stranger, showing a row of small, childlike teeth. “What if I commissioned you to create such a design? Something grander than anything you’ve ever dreamed possible. Would you be interested?”

I recoiled. The man was a kook. It was one thing to discuss art and architecture over a few drinks; quite another to think I’d squander my time and imperil my bid for partnership by entertaining the whims of some strange old bird.

“I’m quite busy enough as it is,” I said, resuming my formality.

“That’s a shame,” he replied. “I’ve got another architect working on it and I was hoping you could give that spitfire a run for his money.”

My interest was piqued. I asked casually whom he had engaged. When he replied that Philip Vardon had been commissioned, I nearly choked on my drink. I had not heard anything of the project and took it as an indication that the firm’s partners were favoring my younger rival.

“Mr. Vardon is a colleague of mine,” I said, somewhat abashed. “I’m sure he’ll do very well by you.”

“But you see, I don’t want just one architect working on it,” he replied. “I’d like another idea – two competing visions.”

I turned up my nose and indicated that it was little more than a contest in fantasy – an exercise more appropriate for a student project than serious professionals. With a knowing smirk, the stranger informed me that he intended to construct the winning design. On an immense scale. No expense would be spared.

I laughed, but he did not. The stranger’s dark face was deadly earnest. His hand gripped mine, hot as a poker. He urged me to abandon all constraint, to indulge any and every fever dream of grandiose design. Phil Vardon was doing so – Phil Vardon was channeling the Sumerian ziggurats, the Parthenon, and Taj Mahal with unflagging eagerness. The winner would generate enormous fees. The winner could set up his own firm, dispense with worrying over partnership at Langston, Finch, and York....

The conversation was unsettling. I began to doubt that the stranger's appearance was coincidence; that his supposition of my profession was mere guesswork. I excused myself and went to the lavatory, aware that the entire pub now seemed to be quarreling – people shouting, shaking their fists at one another. Staring at my reflection above the sink, I splashed my face and resolved to leave. But by the time I returned, the stranger had already departed. The bartender had restored order and seemed unaccountably cheerful as he rinsed several mugs. I requested the check, but he waved me off – insisted that my friend had taken care of everything. With a chuckle, he held up a coin, a gleam that was none other than a Piece of Eight – Spanish gold, centuries old.

It was all very queer and disturbing, but I was nonetheless intrigued and somewhat disappointed that the stranger had left without saying goodbye. I assumed that my apparent disinterest had persuaded him to solicit elsewhere.

I was mistaken, for the following Monday he was waiting at my office, looking much the same as he had at The Uxbridge Arms. I greeted him cordially and noticed that Vardon was lingering outside the door under the flimsy pretense of conversing with my secretary. The door was closed, conversation was engaged, and one half hour later, the stranger departed having commissioned my design. It was to be delivered in a month's time and the final drawings were to be done by hand.

"No cheating," he had chuckled. "None of this computer gobbledygook – I want to see sweat and fingerprints in the work. I'm of the old school."

A sharp rap of his cane emphasized this point. Rising, he crushed my hand in a farewell grip, and hobbled out of my office with a leer that made poor old Sally blush. It was hardly a surprise that Vardon soon appeared in my doorway, feigning innocent interest in the mysterious stranger.

"You know perfectly well who he is," I said coldly. "You can muck about with your Parthenon and ziggurats. I have work to do."

Vardon merely smiled; he was always game.

In the next month, all hell broke loose. I suppose at some level, we all have our fears of the Apocalypse; some misgiving that our comfy little world could come crashing down. Martha was the first to sense something was amiss. The Prime Minister was addressing the country after that dreadful string of assassinations. All she could say was "His eyes don't look right. Call me crazy, but I don't think that's him...." Of course, the country would learn the truth within the hour. There are wolves in the government, monsters in overcoats at every corner, checking their lists, lurking under streetlamps to harass honest citizens. No television anymore. No telephones. Only the loudspeakers – register, register, register! Informers everywhere. The food is drying up – trade is at a standstill. The government is in enemy hands; ration cards count for all. All communication with the world has evaporated. Martha hasn't heard from her sister in Luxembourg. The lines are dead. London is in a panic, churches overflowing with the penitent.

By any sane measure, I should have been a party to this terror, succumbed to this prevailing fear that we had reached an End of Days. But I did not. I was too busy. I was exerting myself as I'd never done before. The stranger's project had consumed me. Even when the Thames ran red, when most businesses had been locked and shuttered, I found myself at the office, working zealously on my designs. My wife thought me mad – pleaded with me to stay home, to avoid the patrols and keep our heads down like good 'uns. But I can't. The patrols don't pester me – I hide in plain sight, walking to my office as though the Union Jack still flew.

Vardon is there, too, of course. The electricity is out, but he's somehow acquired a generator. His lights are on at all hours; I see his shadow pacing up and down, hunching over his drafting table as he concocts his design. I work by candlelight, embracing the antiquarian in me as I study historical plans, dissect and combine, blend and meld designs spanning five millennia.

The weeks pass. There's scarcely anyone on the streets now. London is a ghost town. Now and again I see movement behind the shutters; I catch the gleam of curious eyes as I walk down the deserted avenues to my office, passing the vyes, who leave me be. But those walks have become fewer; most nights I sleep on my office floor, terrified that Vardon with his inexhaustible energies should gain the advantage while I rest in the company of my wife and child. Martha is angry with me. She doesn't understand. Everything I do is for them. Everything.

Just two days until the client will review our submissions. It's late. Vardon shuts off the generator and leaves his office. The man is a wreck. He needs a shave and a bath, but there is a sinister, triumphant gleam in his eye. He wanders over to my drawings, insouciant, intrusive. He offers an acknowledging nod to my masterpiece before unrolling his work and laying it over my own.

Nothing needs to be said.

His is better.

Everything about it is superior. The concept is unfettered, his synthesis seamless, even the sketches of the exterior have the look and feel of a Michelangelo. By comparison, my designs appear small, mechanical and petty. They possess nothing of Vardon's grace or fluidness; nothing to approach the scale or grandeur of the vision or the building itself. His work is inspired, the product of a genius. I am a mere tradesman on commission.

"No hard feelings, Robert," he said sliding his plans back in their tube. "The stakes are too big for old chums and all that nonsense. I appreciate what you've done for me in the past, but I'm going to see this built. Give it up and come along for the ride."

I wanted to throttle him. No one would need to know. There were bodies everywhere these days, what was one more? There were no police; no functioning court system; Hobbes was a prophet. But I was not a violent man. I could never act upon that sudden, savage impulse. I stood aside and watched him go.

Returning home, I discovered my wife in a panic. Had I heard the news? Had I heard the proclamation? Every household was to paint a symbol upon its front door, the circular seal of some terrible authority. She thrust a printed sheet at me bearing an elaborate pentagram wound with curious designs. I glanced at the strange, ominous name whose letters were spaced about its border: Astaroth.

The instructions stipulated that the seal must be displayed by dawn as a sign of final submission and allegiance. Rumors had spread like wildfire, chilling tales from other cities where such orders had already been issued. Those who had failed to display the sign disappeared and were never heard from again. Martha was hysterical. What were we to do? Should we run? Martha had heard of others fleeing to the countryside or on to small boats bound for Iceland. Should we abandon our home and go?

I considered the option, but quickly put it aside. Another plan was forming in my mind, a scheme that overrode all my morals and misgivings. Kissing Martha, I told her not to fear – we would be fine. We would be better than fine, I assured her. We would thrive. My most important client seemed to have tremendous influence with the newly established authorities. He would ensure we were well taken care of.

Ignoring her pestering questions, I went into my workroom and rummaged for some brushes and paint. With the flier in hand, I set to copying the seal upon our front door and garage. The neighbors were doing the same, adults all working away with earnest fury. Once I'd completed the seal, Martha calmed down somewhat and put our young one to bed.

But I did not join her when she retired. I waited downstairs, watching the grandfather clock tick the hours away. I had work, I told her, important work. Don't wait up.

I slipped out of the house sometime past three in the morning. It was not so very far to Vardon's house – the walk from Kensington to Clarendon took no more than ten minutes, even as I kept to the mounds of accumulating garbage and skirted the flickering

streetlamps at this ungodly hour. Vardon was already abed, no doubt. The curtains to his home were drawn and there were no lighted candles or lanterns visible from inside.

As I lurked across the street from his house, a nervous exultation came over me. I'd experienced nothing of the sort since committing sophomoric pranks at Gonville and Caius. There, glistening upon Vardon's white door was the red seal of the Astaroth. The paint was still wet; it glistened under the moonlight, a perfect circle beneath the brass knocker.

One cannot simply cover up wet paint without making a mess of things. But I'd anticipated this. In my pail, I'd brought a scraper, rags, and a small pot of white paint along with a broad brush suited to the purpose. Within five minutes, I'd removed Vardon's efforts so that all that remained was a faint pink smear. Five additional minutes with a paintbrush was all I required to eliminate any trace of the seal. By the time I departed, Phil Vardon's door was a virtual banner of defiance – a gleaming white expanse in contrast to the dutiful seals that abounded. Twenty minutes later, I had slipped back into my house, crept upstairs, and crawled into bed with Martha.

I'd never slept better.

But in the pale, sober light of morning a nagging uneasiness plagued me. My scheme had been crude and impulsive. What if it had been discovered? Surely, suspicion would fall upon me. It was no good, no good at all. I'd done the deed for Martha and little Sofia – to assure our future. It was all for them, but what if I'd made a terrible miscalculation? What if a neighbor had seen me skulking about? The authorities might be marching to my door at this very moment.

I jumped out of bed, washed from cloudy water in the basin. I had to go out, I told Martha – there was important business that could not wait. Winter was coming to London; a pervasive damp that no coat or muffler could reliably counter. I walked about for the better part of an hour before I mustered the nerve to edge down Clarendon. As I

ventured further down the street, I saw that a crowd had gathered in the vicinity of Phillip Vardon's house.

I will not describe what I saw. I will only say that my scheme had worked and that Phil Vardon died an unconscionable death. I will never forget that grisly display upon the steps. Had I known the price of defiance, I should have painted a thousand red seals upon my door.

But what was done was done.

I could not dwell upon it – I had to prepare for my presentation. For all I knew, the stranger had contacted other firms, other architects. I could not presume that my designs should win by mere default. As I turned the corner onto Kensington, however, my spirits rose. I might not be on the same level as the departed Mr. Vardon, but I was a talented professional and capable of holding my own.

The following day, the stranger appeared at the appointed hour, breathing heavily from the many flights of stairs. He wore a great black coat over his suit, a coat he did not bother to remove. His hat, he placed on his lap, and for a moment he simply stared at me with a cunning leer.

"Where is Mr. Vardon?" he asked, peering about the half-lit conference room.

"I do not know," I lied, still busying myself with the candles. "He's been under tremendous strain."

At this, the stranger shook with laughter and sighed.

"Well," he said, leaning forward as I spread the drawings out. "Let's see what we have...."

An hour later, we shook hands. While certain modifications must be made, the basic premise of my design was approved and construction would be begin as soon as Italy ceased its petty insurrections. I was to wrap up my affairs and travel to Rome to await further instruction. All the necessary papers would be provided....

February. I have made the heartrending decision to send Martha and Sofia away. I cannot trust myself with them. There is a hunger welling up within me; terrible, unceasing appetite for things I cannot stomach to put on paper. I have such appalling dreams – nightmares of blood-red seas and great ships under a black sky. There are things in the water, sliding past me. Strange lands loom on the horizon; alien cityscapes of monstrous proportions. There is a buzzing in my head; a ceaseless hum, but I perceive words within it. Syllables flit just out of reach, mocking me.

There are days when I fear that I am not the sole tenant of my body. Something slowly inhabits it and whole days pass when I operate in a sort of fugue. I beg off the project, but the stranger refuses to accept my resignation. He says I've never looked better, that I must see my grand designs come to fruition. When Rome is fully leveled – when we finally break ground – I will know my sacrifice has been worthwhile. Never underestimate the power of scale, he laughs, embracing me before he departs.

My legs are failing me. There is a growing softness to them, a repulsive pliability as though the bones were fusing and turning to jelly. Each morning some baleful vye lifts me out of bed and wheels me to a nearby hill so I may look upon the excavations. Rome, the city of my heart, is nearly gone. Many of its buildings are now rubble – the original Colosseum, the Forum, the Curia. The citizens have long since been driven off to camps beyond the seven hills. Below is a sea of small, blue-skinned creatures and great lumbering monsters twice the height of a man. They swing huge mauls throughout the days and nights, each blow an assault on some columned masterpiece, some ancient monument of humankind.

The work progresses with frightening speed. Gargantuan blocks of stone are quarried – ten feet to a side. The scaffolding alone would constitute an Eighth Wonder of the World. I watch these developments from beneath my blankets, enduring the cold March winds. The voices in my head are growing worse. There is a maddening, ceaseless pain behind my right eye – it is swelling to such a stinging protuberance that I can no

longer shut the lids. The left has contracted shut, a mere slit permitting mere vagaries of light and shadow. Sores now pepper my arms – terrible boils and pustules whose centers seem to be spawning growths of their own – wiggling tendrils beyond my power to control. I will no longer look upon my legs and keep them covered at all times, forbidding myself to linger on the snakelike shapes that course and loop beneath the blanket.

I no longer ask after Martha and Sofia. It is useless; my attendants' lies are no longer plausible. Instead, I wait out the days, staring at the vast construction site and the thousands of figures that crawl about it, mere maggots by comparison. That this was, in some capacity, my greatest dream as an architect is of small consolation. I no longer want to see the building finished; I want to crawl down, down into some dark place where I can hide my deformities and keep away from other humans.

I say 'other' humans, but I flatter myself. My own humanity is dwindling by the day, consumed by some monstrous seed within me. I dread hurting anyone, but I find myself staring at the parades of captured rebels with a ravening that tests my sanity. I refuse to eat; deny every comfort my tormentors (for what else could I call them?) afford me, but it is no use. My body will not die; my appetite grows stronger.

It is late March and something momentous has happened. An announcement has been made to the army of workers and a cheer goes up – a wild, exultant roar that freezes the blood. Some great victory has been achieved. There are whispers through the camp – Astaroth is coming.

Astaroth! I've heard the dread name so many times that the prospect of seeing the Demon for myself cannot help but fascinate. I view him only from a great distance – a comparatively unimposing figure, white and luminescent amidst the thousands who crowd close to see him. By his appearance, he might be Lucifer, some fallen Archangel plucked from a Doré. Despite his angelic appearance, a great fear permeates the hills. My attendants are nervous; they whine in their throats and pace about. From the vyes I hear

word that others are coming from Outside; I hear whispers of rewards denied. There is uneasiness among the vyes, even in the wake of victory.

The stranger visits me. I am bedridden, consigned to a feverish tent while my body grows and mutates. The stranger's appearance has changed. His eyes are those of a cat and a heat, an intolerable heat, radiates from his eminence. He bears a new cane now – a treasure no doubt, as his eyes stray to it throughout our interview. A boon, I gather – some gift from the great Demon, who has departed. Am I comfortable? Am I giddy at seeing my work in person? Was it worth the murder of Philip Vardon? He asks this casually, as though any protest on my account would be absurd, unseemly. He smiles throughout the interview. We might be old friends, chums from the schoolyard pitch. Within the month – aided by some terrible new magic – the palace is finished. My captors think me mad. I no longer speak; no longer register any emotion or reaction when they come and wheel me out to see it. It is indeed marvelous – some aspect of my old self recognizes this – but I am dead inside. I am swaddled in chains throughout the viewing for the vyes fear me now. One strayed too close yesterday morning and by some sudden impulse I had seized it. By the time the others heard its cries, I had devoured half its body. It is all they can do to subdue me. A terrible strength and hunger courses through me; the tentacles that line my arms and comprise my legs have a will all their own.

The vyes think me utterly mad and they are probably correct. But some small corner of my brain retains some humanity, the potential for coherent thought. Throughout the days I sit at my desk, hunched as though dutifully plying my craft. From a distance, they laugh and snigger at my absurd creations – wild, nonsensical drawings that look like a child's scribbles. I write notes...copious notations in the margins. How I hope a clever mind shall study them when I am gone.

I do not delude myself into thinking I have much time. The monster is overcoming me... They are moving me soon. The vyes are rifling through my drawings to see if any resemble my plans for the stranger's palace. They do not. My things are packed. I am

told my “office” is being moved to another location. The stranger’s palace is complete – it’s clear he wants no living witnesses to the design or construction of its secret ways. I’d wager all these vyes and workmen will be dead within the week. Poor fools.

All is ready. In their eagerness to be rid of both this place and me, the vyes have not delved too deeply. The drawings are intact. I have secured a place for these writings. My only remaining hope is that one will find them and have the wit to use them, to see their possibilities....

There was a marked change between this last passage and the final one to come. These last lines were barely legible, mere jittery scrawls as though Hague’s condition had suffered a terrible decline.

We are on traveling...a long cart ride up the old Roman roads.
I cannot abide the sun and huddle in the cart with my old possessions.

I see a house.

There is a well.

This is the end.

I am so very sorry.